STUDYING LABOR CONDITIONS ABROAD

Samuel Gompers, President of American Federation of Labor, Writes His First Letter on Labor Aboard Ocean Steamers and Discusses the Tipping System.

Letter Number One.

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Liverpool, July 1, 1909.

Sailing from New York Saturday, June 19th, the "Baltic" brought us to Liverpool, Sunday, the 26th. A Smooth sea, sunshine in day time, moonlight at night, very nearly record runs for the ship for every twenty-four hours—these were the transit features of the voyage. A sociable and democratic company of about 400 passengers; little over-dressing or other vain show; dancing evenings on the deck for the young folks; the "solution" of every form of commercial, international, or Labor problem in the smoking room Parliament—these were the social features of the first-cabin group. No thrilling incidents occurred; no icebergs were seen, no collisions threatened, no scandals tried in the "whispering courts," nothing was to be observed more remarkable that the reading of the Sunday services of the Church of England by the purser in the main saloon.

As my mission to Europe is largely for the purpose of making what observations of the working peoples' conditions which the time of my visit permits, I wrote to the Captain of the Baltic asking permission to go over the vessel to see how her wage-workers fared. In reply, he sent a very couteously delivered verbal message by the Purser the effect that the latter official would at any time place himself at my service for a visit of inspection. Accordingly, having made an appointment at a certain hour with the Purser, I waited on him at his office, to be told that, as his time was almost fully taken up by his engagements, he could only devote but twenty minutes to the inspection; but, if I preferred it, he would send with me as a substitute one of the stewards. With a steward, therefore, and an American companion, I went the usual rounds of the parts of the vessel which are shown to favored first-class passengers. As we passed along, the guide glibly recited his well-conned lesson as to the vessel's wondrous bigness and the marvels of its operation. All of this was admirable indeed as a transporting machine designed to carry with safety a population equal to that of a considerable village.

The "Baltic" is certificated by the British and American maritime authorities to carry 426 first-class passengers, 420 second, and 1195 third, and a crew of 370; in all, 2,411 "souls" as the expression is among seamen. I am reliably informed that, despite this limit of passengers and crew, the "Baltis" as well as other steamers bound for the Port of New York, frequently carry over 2,000 third-class passengers. Our guide, the Steward, showed us the various pantries and kitchens for each class, and the bakeshop where the bread is made to fill the "souls" of all classes. Rather rapidly, he walked us through the second-class lounge and smoke-room, through the steerage quarters, and to the landing at the head of steep and narrow ladder-like iron stairways that led to an infernally hot place far below, judging from the fierce waves of heat that rose and enveloped us where we stood. "Visitors never go down there," said our guide; "it's too hot!" And he led us away quickly, so quickly and determinedly that to both my American friend and myself his action signified and commanded "No Admission!"

I asked where the sailormen were lodged. "In the fo'k'sel," he replied; "but visitors never go there. The sailors work four-hour watches; so the fo'k'sel always has a lot of chaps in it asleep, and visitors might wake 'em up." This explanation seemed to voice also our guide's pity for the poor sailors; by making it he successfully kept us out of the forecastle. And in another moment, he had us back at the first-class compaion-way, and was bidding us good-bye-with thanks. —Well, of course, not being an official inspector, I had seen all parts of the ship to which one might penetrate whose relations to the company were but those of a temporary patron. I had been treated most politely, but when back in my steamer chair I found myself musing on the probably similar superficial character, of occasions, of what constitutes "investigations". The way to truth is often blocked by polite attentions.

However, by dint of questioning, a glimpse at the life of the stewards was obtained, and their wage-scale learned; and, besides, we saw the steerage. The stewards on the "Baltic," as on all the European Trans-Atlantic Liners, receive 3 pounds (15 dollars) per trips a year. That is, they receive in round trip, and make at most twelve wages less than 200 dollars a year. What the companies fail to pay the stewards in wages, the passengers are, by force of circumstances required to make up in "tips." Little wonder that the stewards faithfully "work" their charges for "tips".

In maintaining, as one of their firmest institutions, the "tipping" system, the steamship companies manifest a shrewd perception of their own interests. Tip-takers rarely, if ever, strike. Every eager tip-seeker studies the short and sure route to the shilling or the pound awaiting his quest in the liberal passenger's pocket. The tipped servant's vocabulary of lip-gratitude, his gestures of obsequiousness, his methods of forcing upon his intended victim a series of subtle and unnecessary attentions, his

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habitual air of profound deference—what is all this but the practice of a profession in which the most successful need have the least heart or manliness? Is it not an unhappy, if not degrading, occupation, from which the great majority following it would gladly escape? From my investigation, I have no hesitancy in answering the question in the affirmative. And they may—nay, and will—become organized in the protective fold of the Trade Union movement. The time will surely come when, as is already the case in certain English systems of restaurants, the signs will go up in ocean steamships "No tips allowed!" Then will the relations between passengers and steward be those worthy of man to man, each honoring his own position and the position of the other, and each dealing with the other without deceit—a relationship which, though not impossible, is difficult now. Meantime, the steamship companies make a pretty penny out of the stewards' tips; for it is not to be forgotten that the passengers' tips go really, not to the steward, but to the treasury of the line which is relieved of paying him his wages. With say, 500 passengers, first and second class, each on the average giving 10 dollars for tips on a trip, 5,000 dollars is added to the dividends of the stockholders. In addition to all this, there is deducted from the 15 dollars per month paid to the stewards one shilling and ninepence (43 cents) for "breakage"; and this deduction is made every month without regard as to whether anything is broken or not. Making inquiries in Liverpool, one of the men not only confirmed this fact, but added, "Yes, it is true; and the stewards seldom break any thing. Indeed, the stewards pay for and ought to own, not only the glass and crockery, but also the silver-ware on the ships." Not a bad stroke of business, this, and requiring less skill than the work of the "confidence" men and professional gamblers in the steamers' smoke-room. And that worm, the passengers, has never yet turned!

The following story, authenticated by a fellow passenger, is of interest. A passenger, at the end of a recent trip, made this little speech to a steward: "Here's the minimum tip for you. I am obliged by custom to give you something, but I'll not make it enough to help induce the steamship company to still further reduce your paltry pay. But I pledge you that the day you go on strike for better pay and no tips I"ll send you 25 dollars to help you win."

It would be well worth that sum to every American passenger to rid themselves of the tipping nuisance on the steamship voyages.

In the engine room, the stokers and coal-passers and trimmers work four hours on and eight hours off. The stokers receive 22 1-2 dollars and the pursers and trimmers 20 dollars per month. I was unable to see their sleeping quarters; but their Labor representative in Liverpool told me that their 'b'unk-rooms" were anything but models for light and ventilation; that the narrow compartments in which these men sleep are at fully Turkish bath heat temperature. I saw the place where they eat. It is a small narrow compartment, and may be likened to a damp, hot stable. Benches and tables are of the rudest possible construction. Those I saw at a meal had bread, tea, and a sort of stew. The "Baltic" has sixty of these men.

The thirty-six sailors work four hours on and four off; they are paid 20 dollars per month. Their bunks are ranged round the forecastle, and they were sleeping in their clothes when I saw them; the discolored mattresses and blankets looked ready for the rag-shop or the disinfecting chamber.

On contemplating the lot of the sailors, stokers, and coal hadlers of a steamship, one asks himself how it is that men can be found who will consent to get down to such dreary, painful, and ill requited toil, perforemd under such hard conditions. As a fact every man to whom escape is possible must flee from that sort of life. It must be the more helpless characters, from whatever cause, who remain. One thing is to be remembered; the men are bound to work the round trip from England; for if they quit at New York, they forfeit the pay already earned. And another, at Liverpool 22,000 dock laborers report at the gates alongshore every day seeking a job; and on the average only 15,000 find employment. The "surplus" 7,000 in dictate the possible state af employment of maritime labor in Great Britain. The Liverpool dockers have a fairly well organized union, with its own bureau, impartially and in rotation assigning men to the work. It has a system of paying benefits in cases of sickness and death; it has a voice in fixing the wage scale for the men—a better scale than obtained some years ago, low even it is to-day. But with the men on shipboard, it must be admitted the union sentiment at present is not strong.

As one looks at that part of the steerage to which the immigrants into the United States from the East of Europe are packed, he asks himself whether the Government regulations which are applicable are yet up to a civilized standard. To stow away for the night perhaps 100 men (or, in another compartment women) in a low-ceiled space, on layers or in iron births, apart only far enough to admit of only crowding one's way along, is stabling them under worse conditions than cattle are ordinarily kept. The English-speaking- third-class passengers have cabins of two, four, eight berths of bare boards, it is true, but they are in great contrast in possible cleanliness and decency with the dormitories, or rather pens, in which are confined the Italians, Magyars and Russian Jews.

In these observations, obviously, I cast no especial reflection upon the White Star Line. On the contrary, I am prepared to hear that its treatment of stewards and steerage passengers is even better than the average. I but speak of facts that have passed under my own observation, with some mention of the views relevant to them, natural to one who hopes and expects better things for Labor.

One of my fellow-passengers on the "Baltic", a gentleman who is thoroughly conversant with the marketing of men's hats, mentioned to me a recent development in that trade very significent to the people of the United States and particularly to the hatters and hat-manufacturers who have been engaged for the past five months in an industrial struggle. The gentleman to whom I refer informed me that within the last six months the importation of English-made hats has increased by a large percentage, and that there had been a great increase in the use of caps. He reasoned from this that a large number of American working men have been been avoiding the purchase of non-union hats as an easy way of solving the situation by which they were confronted. He said, further, "Suppose, now that the hitherto wearer of Derby hats should learn the advantages and comfort of the cap! It has some decided ones. It is far more easily adjustable to the head than a stiff-rimmed hat. It does not blow off so easily. It lets the wearer lean back against a wall or the back of a car seat. It is not so ready to be blown or knocked off the head. It does not show a dent, and is not so easily soiled. Moreover, it is cheaper. In winter it is warmer, and can be provided with flaps. It may be that the cap, as a result of the dearth of hats, will become the fashion in America with so many classes of people as it is in the British Isles. It some times takes very little pushing one way or another to make or unmake a fashion." If a million or two of organized working men should start buying caps, the cap-manufacturers would soon put the finest in form and material on the market. The result would be a virtual as well as entirely victorious boycott on hats. Hatters now on strike can turn to making caps, but the manufacturers' combine would fare badly. Less causes than their lockout have just as great effect on the fortunes of industries as possible disaster to them. The Executive Council of the American Federation of Labor could become cap-wearers without being in danger of prison as boycotters!

My arrival in Liverpool being on Sunday, afforded me an opportunity of seeing numbers of gatherings of men at meetings in the public squares—meetings of a religeous or reformatory character as well as for the discussion of grievances. Some other time I may report the specific characteristics of these meetings, but for the present purpose I merely report the fact that the evidence was decisive of the great degree of poverty written upon the faces of the immense throngs which I saw. Men with whom I discussed this matter and upon whose statements no doubt can be entertained as to their authentic character, informed me that a tremenduous mass of the workers are in a chronic state of unemployment—that poverty and misery are rampant, ann that the reason for wan faces, tattered clothing, and unshod feet, even on the Sabbath, is to be found in the tremenduous numbers of constantly unemployed workers.

In Liverpool there is a district which has developed into a fullfledged China Town. It covers quite an area of ground, not quite so large as that in New York or San Francisco. Nor, so far as I have been able to learn, are there subterranean habitations. That would not be permitted here. But one feature of the Chinese life in Liverpool I have not observed in the United States. That is, it is quite common in Liverpool for Chinamen either to marry or live in concubinage with white women; and on the streets one can frequently see white women carrying their Chinese offspring in their arms, or almond-eyed tots clinging to the skirts of their white mothers. About twenty years ago the first Chinese came into life of the people of Liverpool, apparently unnoticed. Others followed, until there are fully 2,000 of them. They lured young young girls into their dens, to become finally their victims. In Liverpool's Chinatown, one can see boys and girls from ten to sixteen years of age,s listlessly walking the streets without the slightest indication of the Caucasian in their mother, and with less intelligent but fully developed characteristics of their mongolian fathers. The amalgamation has been the elimination of white without even the maintenance of the best that may be in the character of the Chinese. Already the Chinese question, together with the feature I have mentioned is arousing the thought and concern of a large number of the people of Liverpool.

SAMUEL GOMPERS.

TO MAKE MORE LAWLESSNESS

The Commissioners of Caldwell County Sell a Captured Still So Somebody Else Can Violate the Law.

(Statesville Landmark.)

The Taylorsville Scout mentioned recently that a still captured by the sheriff of Alexander county was somewhat of a white elephant on the hands of the authorities, and they kept it stored in the court house. The commissioners of Caldwell have gone the Alexandrians one better. They passed a formal order at their last meeting that "the still captured by Sheriff Smith be sold at auction at the court house door on the first Monday in August." The former owner of the still, or any other citizen who wants to make a little run on his own account, can, of course, attend the sale and buy, and then proceed in business. It is certainly a curious proceeding. An easy way to get rid of the incubus would be to smash it to pieces.

A prudent man procures [illegible] the sleigh and in winter [illegible] Rounmanian.